Gail and James

down his face. "My career. If I can never dance again, I don't want to live."

Up until after Christmas he was not diagnosed. It was there. It was a possibility. People who came into our home I didn't tell them (that my brother has AIDS). I said, "My brother is very sick. Forgive him if he disappears for a while or lays down."

He was going to see the AIDS specialist at Strong. He had an appointment to see him. He had developed problems in his mouth... like a fungus.

A white fungus?

Yes. And of course his immune system was slowly going. The oxygen to his brain was slowly going. They gave him medicine for the fungus...

Medically there's nothing they could do. One doctor said, "My heart is going out for this person, but medically there's nothing to be done." And especially at the point he was. It wasn't like a year ago. A year ago maybe they could have slowed him down a little bit, but at the point he was it was happening fast. More or less their opinion was, when he does go into the hospital, it will be forever. He's been through so much. Why do this to him? I think also, James had agreed with them. He said, "Listen, I know this is going to happen, and I just want to be with my family and hang on."

And he did, boy, he tried to hand on as long as he could, the little stinker! I'd ask him every day, "James, do you want to go into the hospital? How are you feeling today?"

He'd say, "Well, I'm weak, but I'll eat a little bit." I said, "Anytime." The doctors were ready. All I had to do was make a phone call to Strong. He said, "No. I want to wait... I don't want to go in yet."

James was getting weaker. We, as his family, were saying, "Sweetheart, please—there's got to be something we can do!" Then it kept hitting me. There's nothing we can do. The family is helpless. The victim is this disease is helpless. The doctors are helpless. The only thing to do is to stick it out... stay there with that person.

Did you ever fear for your own health or your family's health?

No. As a matter of fact, I'm such a stupid person sometimes, I love him—loved him—very much, and will always. New Year's Eve came around, and he turned his cheek to me, and I said, "We've been through too much, sweetheart. Happy New Year." I thought, I may not see him again... ever, and I'm going to kiss him. I had kissed him in July. We had a big party. I was dancing with him, hugging him. If I had it, I would have had it a year ago... I could walk out in the street and get hit by a car. So could my children.

Did the community around you know that your brother had AIDS?

In the beginning no. Then when he was admitted into the hospital, and was diagnosed (which was instantly). At that point I used babysitters. I needed my neighbors. It was known in my community—my immediate neighbors—because they'd ask what he had. I said, "He's in intensive care. He has the worst case of pneumonia known, and he's on respirators, and he's been diagnosed as having AIDS, for which there is no hope. Please people, see me through this, because I'm going to need your help. It's going to be a long siege." They came right to my house. Babysat my kids. Brought food. They were excellent.

After it was all over, and James had died, again, they were excellent. I have two friends who had read a terrible article in the newspaper—a scare tactic/stereotype article—which burns me to no end. They had read that in the morning, and they knocked on my door at nine o'clock that night to say, "We read the article, and here we are." Very good people. I'm very proud of my neighbors. Maybe in their own homes they discussed it; but they saw me throwing a ball with my kid, and my children were playing with their children. As my husband said, If anyone would actually say, "We don't want to come to your house"—we would say we understand. We understand that feeling, so it's OK, but no one did.

There has been one incident which, in looking back, I'm 99% sure of, and that's my own minister. We have not been to church since after Christmas, and my brother was part of the service Christmas eve, singing and everything, and the minister of my church did not come to my door through any of it. He called me after my brother died, said he was going to arrive on Thursday, in the morning. There was an article in the paper Wednesday night on it. My minister never arrived. He never called, and he avoids me if I'm on the street. Now, of all the people in the world that I needed!

What denomination was that?

Methodist. Well, my personal opinion was that he was very much afraid himself.

Has that upset your beliefs?

Oh, most definitely. It affects my belief in any church, but not my faith in God and religion for myself and my family. The [church] structure, which I was slowly working into after not being involved, is just totally, as far as my husband and I are concerned, finished. The church structure and this minister-business—head of the church—is, as far as I'm concerned, nonexistent.

It must have been terrible for your parents to know that their son was terminally ill.

It was very difficult... My mother lives next door. I don't think she can handle any stress relating to James. James was her youngest of five children. Her pride and joy. And to lose your youngest at 28, and you're 66. Her words were "It's my turn to go, not his. This is too much for me to handle." It was very difficult. We had also lost a brother-in-law three months prior to James. He was 40 years old, and we saw him, and two weeks later he dropped dead of a heart attack. We had been through a lot of trauma. Of course, prior to that, James being in R Wing, which was devastating. "What is James doing there? This is ridiculous. James is solid, logical, has a head on his shoulder..." It was very, very difficult on her, and of course, now on me. She lives with us. I'm dealing with my brother, and I'm dealing with my mother, and... it's like, SOMEBODY deal with me! And the children—having a three year old and a five year old. It was a rough go. My husband was with us in Germany where we met. James and I met him at the same time, so my husband was like a brother to James.

The other incident, which was devastating to our family. James has an older brother. His older brother would not come to see him in the hospital. For fear... He lives right in New York City, and of course they're getting bombarded with all sorts of articles. We had not seen my brother in a while. James and I were the only two members of the family who did go and see him repeatedly. It hurt me, and I know it hurt James very much, because James had been true to him, and this was the first time James and I, both, said, "We need you." He was not there for us, and I will never forgive him for that...

It was very hard for me because after we admitted James, he was on a respirator, and all he could do was write. So, we got him a big pad, and he'd write out everything. And when I'd come to visit he'd write out our brother's name. "I want to see him." I'd say, "OK, sweetheart, I'm calling him. I haven't been able to reach him..." It was very important to James to see his brother. He didn't write. He didn't even come to his funeral or his burial...

Did your parents know that James was gay or bisexual?

Oh, yes. The family knew. My dad had died when James was only nine years old... The family had accepted that long ago... Whatever he deems his lifestyle to be was OK with us because James was James. It didn't matter to us what his private life was.

Gay people have been around for thousands of years—now, all of a sudden, within the last three to five years, there is a disease that is primarily striking the gay population.

It has been around in the community, however, it has not been so prevalent that it's been an obvious disease, but I'm sure, ten years ago, there were people dying of this immune system breakdown. They just didn't have a name for it, and they didn't know what they were dealing with, as they were isolated cases... The problem with AIDS is that they don't know the cause and they don't know the cure. And without one or the other, they can only go so far.

Do you think the media has created a panic?

My husband and I are very angry. The blurbs on television — two seconds... blurbing that they know how the disease started, however SOME researchers POSSIBLY... MAYBE... (all these little maybes and possiblys). They said that it started by drinking out of the same glass, and there's a possibility (of contracting AIDS)... Now we had "maybe" and we had "some researchers"... Now, who are these people?! You and I sitting around a table? And this blurb after a "maybe" has made it a factual statement suddenly, and that's the end. My husband and I were sitting there watching it saying, "I don't believe they just did that... I wanted to kick the TV in. How dare they? How dare they say anything about any disease without having documented, medical, proven fact. How dare they use the television and the newspaper to scare the life out of people? And that is what they're doing with this disease, and we're very angry. It's ridiculous. They should not report something that involves so many people in a life and death situation, and a prejudice situation—and treat it so nonchalantly.

What is your feeling on the statements by some that AIDS is God's punishment against gays?

Oh, we don't even want to get into that! Oh, no. People used to say, for example, that if God could come down and touch a human being, he touched James. Now, with that concept in my head, there is no way I can even—that's narrowminded, bigoted, absolutely ridiculous... Human beings are human beings, and if these people were Christian at all, they'd keep that in mind. We are all human beings, and we all deserve to be looked at with kindness and with love, and I don't care what community you're from. How dare they, in the name of religion or God or moral majority, make statements like that, because they're actually hypocrites. They're hypocrites... and then to call themselves Christians. It's ridiculous...

I know there are cases right now of human beings who are going through what my brother went through, and nobody gives a damn. And they're doing it alone. Thank God, James had family.

To get back to Strong—We would go in, and the nurses were crying as hard as we were. My sister was in the intensive care—my sister studied opera for a while—she sang every song that James loved. He'd be able to blink at this point. She'd say, "Want me to sing another one?"

She had the whole intensive care floor—all the patients—she was cheering up—not just her brother, and the nurses were there the whole time, letting him know phone calls, everything. They were excellent. They would say, "You go home now." They would call us at the drop of a hat if anything changed. We could go in anytime to see him. Towards the end—now this is the medical staff dealing with this, and to prove how much knowledge they had of the disease—Up until four days before his death, we wore the gloves. We wore the masks. We wore the whole bit. And the medical staff at that point said—"I think it's important for James to see all of you, his family, and the doctors who are working with him, without these ugly get-ups on." They would not, in their right minds, have allowed his whole family, nurses, doctors, to go into the room if they were not 100% sure of what they were dealing with, as far as it being contagious.

It annoys me again the scare tactics. We were told to be careful not to touch saliva and things like that, at that point, but you have to have faith in the medical profession. They're there to help us...

Did you have any problems with getting a funeral parlor?

No. Now, see, this is something I've read in the paper. I don't know now if we would have after what's been in the paper. I don't know how intimidated people would be. They told the funeral director how to treat James. What precautions to take. And we did have an autopsy done. We felt it was important so that other lives could be saved. They did tell us that very few people were having that done. In some cases, people are alone, and they can't reach relatives or whatever, and no one is giving that OK, or the person that could is refusing. I feel it might have helped somebody or brought them closer in research.

There were a lot of precautions. The area was roped off. The funeral director had to go through a very elaborate procedure to pick up James' body because of these precautions.

But it would be similar precautions with any disease that was contagious?

Right. They gave him a special chemical to use, also, just as a precaution. They didn't scare him [the funeral director] in any way.

James had blown up almost five times his size which was a problem. We had to have a closed coffin. The faster paced respirator blew up his whole body. The nurses were crying over that. They said, he's such a handsome person, and for him to go out without dignity upset them very much...

The funeral director had never seen anything like that happen to a human body, but that was the respirator. That was not the disease. It was the level they had keep it for him to get oxygen... That was hard on us. You pick out a suit to put your brother in—his favorite suit—and he can't wear it. We couldn't put his shoes on. Nothing. We did find a very large suit.

Towards the end we did lift the coffin before we left to be sure he was there, and to say our goodbyes, and a lot of the air had left his body. That was a blessing. That made it hard, too. In order to have kept him alive as long as they did, they had to put him on the respirator. They promised us no heroics. We had many talks with the doctors. That's what's important, too, I think. Victims of this disease have to pull it out of doctors. They have to talk, and they have to ask questions.

If you had a statement to the gay community, what would it be?

That's a tough one. This disease is very devastating. Anyone who has it needs support from other people. The one thing you can't do is alienate these people who have this disease because it is so devastating from both a mental and physical standpoint. People have to be there to help each other through it... THIS IS A DISEASE. A terrible, awful thing. It is NOT a moral issue! It is NOT a political issue! It is a MEDICAL issue. And it has to be addressed as a medical issue, and people have to help these

continued on page 12

A P.D.A. for the Seneca Women's Encampment

My first visit to the Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice (Seneca Women's Encampment) was a day long. I knew we were approaching the encampment because many houses along Route 96 took on a new and consistent decoration, the red, white, and blue of the American flag. Tiny flags secured to porch railings with masking tape, larger flags waving from their permanent holders, and even a few enormous flags, yards, it seemed, in width and length, announced to passers-by something. What? That the owners of these flags and these houses and these lawns are Americans, support the American government, believe in the "American way" (whatever that is), or don't wish to be confused with the group at the encampment? Whatever the reason, it is certain that the flags were a response of some kind to the women who were camped, for the summer at least, down the road.

Farther south on Route 96, as we approached the entrance to the Women's Encampment, we had to pass an Amish farm. That's the order of the property—Amish farm, Women's Encampment, Seneca Army Depot. (Remember the puzzles from children's game books—which object doesn't belong here?) The Amish had a food stand near the road, loaded with cookies, shoo fly pies, fruit, and vegetables, and a price list, a jar, and a sign that read, "Please Serve Yourself." That, and not the flags waving earlier, made me feel I was in foreign territory.

We were greeted by women at the entrance to the property. They were friendly, welcoming, offering advice on where to park, where to register, where to camp. On the front lawn, seven or eight women of all ages, along with a few elderly men, sat. The men were permitted no farther on the land than the front yard, one of the few rules at the encampment and one that was respected.

It was still early—around noon—but I could hear the murmer of many hushed voices, like a quiet beehive. I was surprised, later, to find that the subdued sound came from literally hundreds of women, gathered together in small workshop groups, all speaking at normal volume. Again I felt myself to be in foreign, alien territory, for I am used to raised voices, to having to use force of any kind to assert myself, to make myself heard. What I would remember later, after returning to Rochester, was that I had heard at no time a raised voice, a shout, or the word "don't."

We left our things in the car and locked it, for which I felt silly—and ashamed—later. As we made our way to the more removed part of the land, I noticed women emerging from everywhere—from tents, from wooden structures built earlier in the summer, from port-o-janes. I was surprised at the variety of women: young, radical-looking women (which means nothing except that I grew up in the '60's), women with their children (or someone else's children—it was always impossible to tell), handicapped women, Buddhist women, women of color. There were many older women, again as varied in their appearances and, I would learn later, histories as the younger women; I noticed one woman who would have looked as much at home, in her skirt, matching shoes and purse, in a church or shopping at Sibley's. The point is that she looked at home here, too.

I learned during an orientation hour by Jan from Minnesota the history of the encampment, the factual basis of the rumors reported through the media, and the beginnings of a new vocabulary. Jan emphasized the encampment's commitment to peaceful cooperation, not just among the women there, but between the women and the local residents. I was to see, during both my visits to the encampment, with what courtesy, politeness, and respect the women behaved, not just towards each other and the townspeople, but towards the land. The 52-acre plot was loved and cared for not merely for its value as a symbol of women's determination, efforts, and practical hard work; nor for its historical geographical connectiveness to land that hosted other women uniting for peace and justice; but for itself. There was not litter; few women smoked, and those who did felt, I think, like violators of some unspoken pact with the land, the air, the place.

Also in the way of respect for and appreciation of others, we were urged to consider what might be offensive to either the Amish on the neighboring farm or the local residents: bare chests and P.D.A.'s (Public Displays of Affection). We were asked to wear shirts in areas visible from the road; we were advised to remember that the ways most of us live and interact with one another would seem foreign and, therefore, threatening to local residents.

But, in fact, what happened at the Women's Encampment, the attitudes and behavior of the women there, even the women themselves, seemed foreign to *me*. I suspect it did to other women as well. I am angered now, in retrospect, that the sight of women half-naked, half-naked and walking about in the open, not in a lockerroom, which is the only place we see women publicly without shirts, should have seemed such a curiosity to me. I am angered that it should have seemed odd not to know which women were the mothers of which children; I am angered and saddened that I remarked, days later, with such sincere amazement, how *well* consensus worked, how *harmoniously* women with women worked. After the communal dinner that first visit, I washed another woman, a stranger's, plate, and she laughed with surprise: no one had ever washed a plate for her. I am angered that no one ever had.

I say I am angered that so much of what happened at the Women's Encampment should have seemed so foreign to many of us. I could offer a catalogue of reasons why it seemed strange, extraordinary. Yet I knew at the same time that the cultures out of which we come, and the survival methods we—as women, as lesbians, as people of color—have developed within those cultures, have provided the impetus for the Encampment and, what is more, women's quest for world peace and justice. And it seems hardly coincidental that most of the women at the Encampment were lesbians. I want to explain why I feel that is so, knowing all the while that some of my observations about lesbian life, philosophy, and politics may apply to non-lesbians as well.

All lesbians are by virtue of their total identification with women counter-cultural people. While many heterosexual women may behave and feel counter-cultural because of their overt public actions for women's causes or minority issues, the fact of their heterosexuality roots them, some less firmly than others, in a male-oriented society. I say this in the way of observation, not condemnation. In addition, lesbians are oppressed in more ways than now socially-acceptable feminists, the women creating so much alarm in Washington because of the "gender gap"; lesbians are oppressed as women, as sexual deviants, as, usually, economically-depressed people, as the politically incorrect and unrepresented. Lesbians of color, of course, are oppressed in every way imaginable.

Oppressed people learn how to survive, not only in the external world of streets and houses and jobs and income tax, but internally as well. We all have had, by virtue of our gender, a lifetime of practice in the way of preserving our identities as women and yet functioning in mainstream society, of juggling the inner world with the outer world. We have had no property, no wealth, little recognition, few rights; what we have had in the way of legal rights, we have had to grovel for, to ask for in the name of moral decency (food for our abandoned children, prosecution of rapists, recognition as citizens), not potential material gain. The world of profits and losses, of land acquisition through outright purchase by men or imperialist invasion by nations, of larger or smaller stockpiles of weapons, is not our world, not the world of women. Our brains do not compute warfare, do not compute the value of first-strike capabilities, for they threaten the only thing we've ever had—our lives. Life itself has been and is the precious.

So I think women—and this is reflected in our literature, our graphic arts, our music—have constructed an inner world of their own, one they share and have in common with all other women. It is no wonder then that the women at the Encampment greeted one another, embraced one another, as if they were long-standing friends, for in a way they were, spiritually and emotionally, even though they were meeting for the first time. The Encampment allowed, for perhaps the only time in many of our lives, the inner world to be the outer world. For once, there was no compromising.

The respect they have for life, all life, has not been selfishly hoarded by women, as capitalist societies hoard their own valuables. It is extended to everyone. On my second visit to the Encampment, the weekend of Labor Day, along with 71 other women, I spent seven hours in the Seneca Army Depot jail. The women in my pen spent much of that time talking to the M.P.'s who were guarding us. Most of the soldiers were kind to us, some even interested in what we had to say. One young M.P., however, was an extreme exception. He was a beautiful young man, perhaps 18 or 19, who announced belligerently to us that he had joined the army "to kill commies," particularly those in El Salvador. Some of the women were disgusted by him; most gave up on him. He was my saddest experience, not because he or his attitudes seemed foreign to me—they seemed all too familiar—but because he, with his human hand, his human eyes, should utter such destructiveness, should feel such hatred. It was the only time I wept with sorrow.

Other times I wept with amazement and relief. Despite the foreignness of many aspects of the encampment, being there was nevertheless like coming home, like recognizing some unspoken, unutterable truth that has been half-known or only sensed intuitively for a long time. It was the relief of letting go, of fusing, at long last, the internal with external.

—Gloria Richards

Health

continued from page 9

symptoms and side effects of a suppressed immune system. As always, if science is to work effectively, then those who seek it in times of acute stress should also utilize its potential before certain symptoms become pandemic.

Perhaps history will once again serve us in our understanding of the nature of disease, which lies with-in the confines of a society that is imbued with persistent contradiction, specifically in matters of health and "wholeness." For it has been shown, over and over again, that few individuals can extract any real value or meaning for themselves from "dead situations." The history of immunosuppression is being supported by a combination of two aspects of human culture: the victims of immunosuppression and the potential victim of immune deficiencies. Once again, the dead have paid their price by providing historical significance.

AIDS

continued from page 11

people who have this. That's what's important. That's what the gay community or any community has to keep in mind, and not get panic-stricken.

What would you say to the non-gay community?

The same thing. I would say—Wake up, people, because if we don't get the research, and if money isn't funded into this (which I see they are allocating money for this), and if you don't help people through this, then it's going to be the unknown, and you'd better read about it and discover about it in case it gets out of control... Nobody knows... It's clear cut what happens to people who have this—from the rashes to the weight loss to the mental anxieties that people go through (which society is helping put on them—mental problems are part of society's fault)—People are people, and I don't care what community they're from, and I don't care whether they're black, white, Chinese or have one arm. It's a medical problem that everybody has to address...

Trouble?

If you are a crime victim but are reluctant to call the police, or you feel you have been mistreated by an officer, you can call the

Gay Alliance's Police Liaison

CALL

428-7175

Highland Section
Ask for Captain Urlacher